



District Judge Robert O. Hippe Sends Parents to Class to Benefit Children

Written for the Judicial News by Jolene Daib

A couple who is experiencing the trauma of divorce or separation knows intimately how painful it is for them.

What they may not understand is how difficult it is for their children.

District Judge Robert Hippe of Scottsbluff watched for years as children struggled to cope with conflicts within their families. He saw how harmful it was for children to be caught in the middle between two parents they love.

Three years ago Hippe decided to do something to help these families. He had read about a program that the district judges in Denver started about six years ago to address this issue. Hippe organized a small group of interested people in Scottsbluff, and they began studying similar programs around the country. Together they developed a curriculum and a program entitled, "Families in Transition."

Like Hippe, district judges in Denver and elsewhere felt parents



needed to know what was happening to children during a divorce or separation.

"Children are caught in the middle," Hippe said. "The children feel they have to choose one side or the other and can't have both parents as a result. We thought parents ought to understand that and (the parents) didn't. We felt there was a need for that education."

More than three years ago Hippe began requiring a parenting education class for all parents who were in a dispute involving the custody or visitation of children. Soon other Nebraska judges began doing the same, and in 1998 the Nebraska Parenting Act went into effect, giving judges the authority to require parenting classes in any case involving child custody or visitation.

After the law passed, more judges began requiring the classes. Hippe feels the classes are important to help parents understand that their disputes can cause long-lasting harm to their children, but this can be avoided if parents take the time to learn how to handle their differences in a positive way.

Lori Burkey, executive director of the Center for Conflict Resolution in Scottsbluff, helped write the curriculum for "Families in Transition," and teaches the parenting classes in Scottsbluff and Alliance.

The classes cost \$45, last three hours and are offered one Saturday each month in both Scottsbluff and Alliance. Each class is divided into three sections: effects of divorce or parental separation on adults, effects of divorce or parental separation on children, and communication skills for parents. A couple that is divorcing or separating attends different classes so each person can speak freely.

Sometimes parents come to class angry about being ordered by the court to attend.

"For the most part, by the end of the class people are glad they came," Burkey said. "The evaluations are positive. The overwhelming comment that we get on the evaluations is that they didn't realize what their kids were going through, and they plan to work harder to make this transition easier for them."



OF INTEREST TO THE JUDICIARY

The impact that divorce or separation has on children is directly linked to the level of conflict between parents, Burkey said. If parents are fighting over their children, pulling and pumping them for information, children learn quickly how to adapt and will react in different ways. They may try to protect one parent and alienate themselves from the other parent. Or they may try to protect both parents by keeping quiet.

“For kids whose parents allow their kids to love both parents, children talk freely about their relationships with both parents and adjust very well,” Burkey said.

As class participants, parents learn how the divorce is affecting them personally and what they need to do to take care of themselves. They also learn what their children are experiencing and how this varies

depending on the age of the child. Burkey explained that children handle things differently depending on their age and developmental stage.

The class also focuses on how a parent can get along with an ex-spouse in regard to their children. Parents are taught the difference between a parental relationship and a spousal relationship.

“We encourage them to identify the difference between those two and begin severing the spousal relationship and strengthening the parenting relationship,” Burkey said.

Jonathan Krutz teaches similar parenting classes as executive director of the Southeast Nebraska Mediation Center. The center is based in Beatrice and serves a 16-county area.

“Nobody practices how to get divorced,” he said. “So when they find themselves in that situation there is some information that would be really helpful for them to know.”

Judges are finding that parents who have completed the classes listen to each other better and think more about what is in the best interest of their children. That change in attitude is selling judges on the idea of the family education classes, Krutz said.

“Before parents come into mediation they are angry with each other and scared for themselves. By going through the class they can recognize their feelings are normal. It lets them collect their thoughts and make more reasonable decisions. You reduce the level of uncertainty about the whole situation.” ❖